De-tangling Motherhood: Adoption Narratives in Disney's *Tangled*

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MOTHERS ARE PRECARIOUSLY SITUATED IN MOST FAIRY TALES AND EVEN MORE SO IN Disney film adaptations. From *Snow White* to *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast* to *Bambi, Aladdin* to *The Little Mermaid* to *Finding Nemo*, dead mothers abound. If they are very fortunate, the young female protagonists of these contemporary tales receive a replacement mother, like the kindly Mrs. Potts for Belle, the fairy godmother for Cinderella. Less fortunate protagonists, such as *Aladdin*'s Jasmine and *The Little Mermaid*'s Ariel, may be provided with a friendly animal companion. Frequently, however, the maternal replacement does not live up to the original and may even appear as an evil stepmother. The female protagonists of Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and even The Little Mermaid must confront these evil stepmothers, most often witches with both beauty and power. This replacement of the "true" mother figure remains essential to most Disney films with female leads.[1]

Marina Warner, in her book *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, explains the mother absence in fairy tales in two ways. First, she notes that, for reasons of maternal health, until fairly recently many mothers did, in fact, die when their children were still young, thus leaving behind a husband who would have to make arrangements for their care. She writes, "The absent mother can be read literally as exactly that: a feature of the family before our modern era, when death in childbirth was the most common cause of female mortality, and surviving orphans would find themselves brought up by their mother's successor" (Warner 213). Second, she points out that the Grimm Brothers, who revised and published their own versions of oral fairy tales, were reluctant to situate a biological mother as the antagonist to her young daughter, as was the case in the original versions of such stories as *Hansel and Gretel;* instead the Grimms rewrote these stories "to conform with prevailing Christian and social values . . . substituting another wife for the natural mother, who had figured as the villain in the versions they had been told" (Warner 211). Thus, in fairy tales, the good mother is frequently "supplanted by a monster" (Warner 201). Such stories teach as well as reinforce cultural stereotypes about what it means to be a mother: loving, nurturing, attentive, and often self-sacrificing.

This image of the mother does not always apply to adoptive mothers, although positive images of adoption are becoming more ubiquitous in popular culture. Celebrities like Madonna, Rosie O'Donnell, and Angelia Jolie are proud adoptive mothers, publicizing adoption while simultaneously trying to protect their children from the spotlight. Famous figures from Roy Rogers to Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy's, have established

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nonprofit foundations dedicated to adoption advocacy. Jamie Lee Curtis's breakthrough children's book, *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, offers positive images of an adopted child's relationship with her parents. More recently, NPR correspondent and Weekend Edition host Scott Simon has been touting his new book, *Baby, We Were Meant for Each Other: In Praise of Adoption*, earning airplay throughout NPR's spectrum of programming.

Despite such attempts to promote positive images of adoption, however, pop culture adoption narratives still tend toward the tragic; at the very least, adopted children —particularly in their teenage years—are frequently troubled characters in these stories. From the narcissistic Rachel on FOX's *Glee* to the guarded Peyton on the CW's *One Tree Hill* to the deeply troubled Jesse on HBO's *In Treatment*, TV teens range in behavioral tendencies from ambivalent to enraged about their adoptive status, vacillating between love and anger at their parents, both adoptive and biological. This lack of contentment certainly makes for compelling drama, but it generates and perpetuates negative cultural ideologies about adoption. As Susan Bordo argues, "The problem is that these representations are all we have to inform our public 'imaginary' about adoption" (323). Thus, prevailing images about adoption have remained stigmatizing and stagnant.

Disney's recent princess film, *Tangled*, does, indeed, entangle the issues of motherhood and adoption, drawing on their dominant cultural representations. Gothel, the woman who steals the baby Rapunzel, is distinctly not a witch: she has no special powers, other than her cunning and her wit. Yet Gothel's drive to remain young and to cheat death enables her to take, keep, and hide a child for eighteen years, raising the girl as her own. The film provokes the viewer to question whether Gothel loves her stolen daughter, whom she regularly belittles and ultimately attempts to keep by force, yet for whom she also seems to have some maternal feelings. Katherine Bartnett argues that in their representations of women and girls, Disney films offer a "mixed bag of destructive and constructive representations ... of gender roles" (190). Examining these works in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality,[2] many critics, such as Jack Zipes, argue that Disney films rewrite and revise fairy tales in ways that "reinforce the social and political status quo" (22). Bringing together the disciplines of adoption studies and fairy tale literary criticism, I argue that Gothel in Disney's film *Tangled* represents the status quo of contemporary conflicting views of adoption—in particular, of the adoptive mother as one who steals a child from her "real" parents and, while perhaps never physically abusing her, does not care for her as would those original parents, who would treat their daughter as the princess she truly is. And while the film suggests, in ways that fairy tale critics ignore, that adoption generates a loving relationship between mother and child, the film ultimately refutes any ambiguity around adoption by prohibiting Gothel from remaining a mother once Rapunzel knows that she is not her biological daughter.

In Disney's film, Flynn Rider is the knowing orphan—albeit one who has reinvented himself from Eugene Fitzherbert into a "swashbuckling rogue" and thief—but Rapunzel is the unknowing one, unaware of her circumstances. Marianne Novy tells us that, in America and England in the mid-twentieth century, closed adoption was ubiquitous: "Often, adoptees and their parents were expected to be silent about the very fact that they were an adoptive family. If adoption agencies succeeded in their ideal of matching the appearance of new parents and children, the adoption might well be invisible" ("Imagining" 5). The adoption in *Tangled* is clearly illegal—a kidnapping. But the

secrecy historically surrounding adoption continues to create public unease around the potentially illicit nature of even legal adoption; such apprehensions remain in public discourse. International adoption in one country after another has been shut down due to concerns over corruption in adoption processes. In 2008, adoption was suspended in Vietnam because of what *The Guardian* reported as the "trade in Vietnamese babies, kidnapped and stolen from their parents and effectively sold to families in the US and elsewhere" (MacKinnon). In 2009, adoption was suspended in Sierra Leone over the legality of the adoptions and the integrity of the process. In 2010, adoption was suspended in Nepal because of unreliable documentation in cases involving children claimed to have been found abandoned. Last year, allegations emerged that "local family planning officials in China, in the name of enforcing the 'One Child Policy,' seized children from their birth families and sold them to orphanages" (US Department of State). Furthermore, as Christine Ward Gailey points out, "Nowhere is an outright market in children legal, but mediated payments are common in many countries" (89). These represent only the most recent history of concerns over the legitimacy of transnational adoption.

Domestic and, particularly, interracial adoptions are also fraught with such fears. When the white Martha Satz describes her adoption of her mixed-race two-year-old son from foster parents, and encounters the difficulties of taking him away from the only home he has ever known, she writes, "He had made hysterical lunges toward the door. I had barred the way. I had experienced myself as kidnapper" (268). And I have my own uncomfortable memory of a dear friend telling me, while I was in the process of adopting my first child, that she could never adopt because she could not take another woman's baby away from her. Viewers of *Tangled*, especially adoptive parents, are particularly attuned to these adoption as abduction resonances in the film. Claudia Nelson surveys online adoption forums and blogs on the topic of *Tangled* and while she finds that most posters and bloggers intellectually differentiate themselves from Gothel as criminal, they instinctually feel an uncomfortable association with her: "the immediate response of the adoptive parent to Mother Gothel often seems to be a feeling of guilt by identification, followed by repression of this response" (5).[3] Thus the gray zone between adoption and abduction remains a contemporary concern.

The Disney film raises other adoption issues as well. As is often the case in international and interracial adoption, mother and child do not look alike in *Tangled*. Both retain the slender body type requisite to Disney beauty standards, and both appear, at first glance, Caucasian. But both likewise fit the oppositional images of innocent and corrupt beauty that appear not just throughout the body of Disney films but also throughout literary history. As Warner points out, "In their symbolism, Walt Disney and his artists were merely following tradition" (366). She references the "teeming population of blonde fairytale heroines," arguing that, historically, "Blondeness is less a descriptive about hair pigmentation than a blazon in code ... it was the imaginary opposite of 'foul,' it connoted all that was pure, good, clean" (362, 364). In contrast to this image, Gothel is dark and forbidding, comparable to the evil queen and sorceress in Snow White. Warner further argues that "blond hair implies pale skin, which in turn entails lack of exposure, again on a doubled level, either to the rays of the sun in outdoor work, or to the gaze of others" (368). But where Warner's gender- and class-based analysis ends, other critics expand it to include race and ethnicity as well. For example, Paulette Caldwell, in her essay "A Hair Piece: Perspec-

tives on the Intersection of Race and Gender," points out that, for women of color, hair "is related to the perpetuation of social, political, and economic domination of subordinated racial and gender groups" (110). Gothel's too-wide eyes and smile are less traditionally beautiful by Western standards, and her curly dark hair, which moves as a mass rather than flows—it is clearly not "good" hair—suggests a Mediterranean or Latina background. In contrast, Rapunzel is all lightness and blonde—egregiously so, with her train of golden locks. Flynn Rider, her love interest, even calls her "Blondie." She is pure Anglo, with her green eyes, pale skin, and straight but flowing tresses, and her hair certainly flows, in a feat of computer-generated animation, almost as if it is alive. Clearly Rapunzel does not belong to Gothel.

According to Margaret Homans, "'Matching' (not only by appearance but also by religion) had been the leading principle of child placement in adoption in the US through most of the twentieth century, but the 1960s saw increasing numbers of transracial adoptions" ("Adoption and Essentialism" 259). Many adoptive relationships today are not only transracial but also transnational, involving first-world white mothers and third-world children of color. Helena Grice further points out,

> Since the majority of parents who adopt across racial lines are white, concerns about differences between white perceptions of the world and the experiences and worldviews of children of color become particularly acute. Among others, issues of identity are thrown into especially sharp focus: visible differences in appearance between adoptees and their parents; the question of how to cope with racial stereotyping and racial slur; the chasm between an Anglo-American family heritage and an alternative ethnic ancestral heritage and cultural background. (124–25)

At a first glance, *Tangled* seems to subvert that image, holding out the possibility for transgressive results by reversing the typical racial adoptive relationship and undermining the popular rescue narrative of many transnational adoption stories written by adoptive parents. But rather than tackle issues of race and difference, the film predictably reasserts the racialized stereotype of the white child who is out of place with a non-white parent and reaffirms the necessity of reestablishing that child's proper status in the social order. Julie Berebitsky points out that, historically, "Blonde babies in 'brown' homes, even middle-class brown homes, were an intolerable breach of the color hierarchy" (11). So even without foreknowledge of the fairy tale, one could predict that this mother–daughter relationship will not end well. Stephen Benson argues that the contemporary fairy tale offers "a ready-made store of images and plots of gender relations, class conflicts, scenarios of sexuality, and dramas of ethnicity, each ripe for scrutiny and overhaul via a contemporary ideological agenda" (12–13). Yet *Tangled* largely misses such opportunities for twenty-first century ideological revision, seeming instead to rely on binaries of good and evil and to reiterate the same tired old notions about beauty, race, ethnicity, and adoption.[4]

The only purpose served by Gothel's quest for eternal youth is, indeed, youth—and its accompanying beauty. She seeks no great wealth or power; indeed, she seems, like Rapunzel, to have no relationships in the world outside the tower. The magic golden flower that she finds has the "ability to heal the sick and the injured"—which Gothel puts to use by "hoarding its healing power and keep[ing] herself young for hundreds of years." In her song to the flower and, ultimately, to Rapunzel's hair, she croons, "Make the clock reverse, Bring back what once was mine." In this regard, then, Gothel remains

a one-dimensional character—and that dimension is defined by gender stereotypes. Cynthia Rich analyzes the fear in Western culture of older women. She writes of the older woman: "She is—like the lesbian—that monstrous woman who has her own private reasons for living apart from pleasing men. On the one hand, she is a throwaway, on the other a threat" (15). Rich goes on to discuss some of the common factors of ageist oppression, one of which is "internalized self-hatred, including passing when possible" (6). Gothel fits this description precisely: she is the older woman obsessed with youth, simply for the sake of looking young; the power of Rapunzel's hair works better than any anti-aging cream currently on the market. Yet Gothel's desire for youth may extend beyond mere shallow longings for beauty and immortality. As Warner points out, old women have been particularly vulnerable members of our society. "In the centuries when the image of Mother Goose was being disseminated through numerous editions of fairy-tale collections," she tells us, old and unattached women, including widows, were often considered "useless" and were caught in "the old struggle to survive and plead for the mercy of the young" (229, 230). Warner argues that the economic, social, and legal ramifications of the history of marriage and the family create a fairy tale ideology in which, as in reality, women compete with other women over limited economic resources, usually provided by men (238). It is therefore not surprising that older women, seemingly unable to contribute to the economic life of the family, would be vilified.

Gothel, however, is not the female villain of the traditional fairy tales. She has not married Rapunzel's father and usurped the real queen's crown, so she is not a stepmother. Nor is she a witch, as in the Brothers Grimm tale, in which the old and powerful enchantress by the same name gets a child in exchange for the food stolen from her garden by the girl's parents (Grimm Brothers).[5] Disney's Gothel has no powers of her own, but is simply wise enough to understand and manipulate the power of Rapunzel's hair. This Gothel is just an "old woman," one who has lived hundreds of years and wields a "big knife," as one of the ruffians points out. And unlike the traditional story, in which the witch only visits Rapunzel in her tower, Gothel lives with her, caring for the girl from childhood into young adulthood. She is, indeed, a mother, as the film emphasizes by Rapunzel referring to her regularly as "Mother Gothel." Yet this phrase also denotes that this is not a natural motherhood, as most children do not use their mother's personal name as an appellation. And while Warner refers to both the stepmother and mother-in-law figure in fairy tales as a "kind of adoptive mother," even using the term "foster mother" to reference Rapunzel's literary antecedents, Gothel is clearly none of these (219, 223).

The writers of the film seem themselves to be conflicted about Gothel's relationship with her adopted daughter. On the one hand, Gothel is aligned with a slew of evil Disney stepmothers: egomaniacal, narcissistic, and arrogant. Her sole interest in Rapunzel seems to reside in the magical qualities of the girl's hair, of which Gothel requires regular doses, like a drug addiction, to maintain her youth. Thus Gothel confirms our cultural discourse about the commodification of adoption, in which adopted children become "commodities to be consumed and adoption merely another way to satisfy personal needs and desires" (Berebitsky 4). Like Cinderella, Rapunzel does all the chores in the household, including the heavy lifting—sometimes Gothel, from the bottom to the top of the tower. Clearly ungrateful, Gothel declares, "I'm not getting any younger down here"—a direct reference to the swift aging she experiences when away from

Rapunzel's hair. And she is "determined to keep it hidden," as the film tells us, which she accomplishes by hiding her ulterior motives behind the lie that she is keeping Rapunzel "safe and sound."

All the cultural tropes of bad adoptive motherhood are here. Gothel, according to Nelson, is "an unmarried woman of inappropriate age" (8). She is also a single mother, possibly lesbian, as she clearly has no male love interest (although perhaps that represents more of the film's ageism). Age is significant for adoptive mothers, who may have spent years trying to conceive a child biologically before spending additional years trying to adopt. Reproductive failure hangs menacingly over the heads of adoptive mothers, who clearly remain unable to fulfill their culturally instituted role of producing an heir. Warner discusses how "the infertile woman, past the age of childbearing, transgresses the function and purpose of her sex, and like any transgressor against the God-given, natural order could serve to represent other pejorative and repugnant aberrations" (44). As such a flawed woman, Gothel can never fit the ideal of motherhood, no matter how young she makes herself look. As Western ideas of family are premised on ownership of children, adoption calls into question the validity of children as property and raises concerns about to whom such children belong, creating issues of rivalry, competition, and polarization between biological and adoptive mothers.

Like the traditional fairy tale stepmother, adoptive mother Gothel also restricts the freedom of her beautiful young daughter (Tater 136), who can "do nothing, take charge of nothing, but suffer the sorcery and authority—and perhaps the hostility—of the woman whose house she has entered" (Warner 220). Rapunzel has spent the entirety of her eighteen years contained in a tower, locked away from the world; thus this story falls in line with the long tradition of female captivity narratives.[6] Yet while this captivity is physical, it is also emotional; Gothel keeps her daughter contained not through physical violence but by inculcating in her intense fears of the outside world. In her song, "Mother Knows Best," Gothel intentionally frightens Rapunzel, drawing on her childish fears and lack of knowledge to paint a world of terror. She tells her, "One way or another something will go wrong, I swear," warning her of "Ruffians, thugs, poison ivy, quicksand, the plague. Also large bugs, men with pointy teeth." To the sheltered Rapunzel, these images of the outside world are both credible and incredibly terrifying. Perhaps more disturbing, however, are Gothel's attempts to undermine Rapunzel's self-esteem; according to Nelson, Gothel's actions are "presented not as black magic but as bad mothering, American style" (1). Gothel constantly criticizes Rapunzel for being too slow or too dull, quickly following it up with an unconvincing "I'm just teasing" or a patronizing "Stop taking everything so seriously." Her song takes this approach even further, when she characterizes Rapunzel as

Sloppy, underdressed, immature, clumsy.
Please, they'll eat you up alive.
Gullible, naïve, positively grubby,
Ditsy and a bit. . .well, vague.
Plus I believe—getting kind of chubby!

Karen E. Rowe points out that such behavior is typical of fairy tale stepmothers who "habitually devise stratagems to retard the heroine's progress" (212). Clearly intended to destroy Rapunzel's self-confidence regarding her intelligence, her abilities, and even her body image (a particularly unfortunate Disney update to the story), these lyrics serve as a method of eliminating any sense of agency that the young girl might have, again blurring Gothel's adoptive mother status with the traditional Disney stepmother role. To further reinforce her message, Gothel's pleas of "Skip the drama, stay with mama" transform quickly into veiled threats: "On your own you won't survive," and "Don't forget it, you'll regret it." And the threats themselves turn into imperatives, when Gothel tells Rapunzel, "Don't ever ask to leave this tower again," and then, in the face of Rapunzel's persistence, yells, "You are not leaving this tower, ever!" Her frustrated sigh of, "Now I'm the bad guy," holds double significance for the audience, as we easily recognize her villainy. This homogenous representation of the adoptive mother reaffirms our cultural hegemonies surrounding the mistreatment of adopted children by their mothers.

We see further evidence of her villainy later in the film when Gothel works to destroy the relationship that is budding between Rapunzel and Flynn Rider. She reprises her song, "Mother Knows Best," reinforcing her attempts at undermining Rapunzel's agency and sense of self worth. She sings,

Dear, this whole romance that you've invented
Just proves you're too naive to be here.
Why would he like you, come on now, really?
Look at you, you think that he's impressed?
Don't be a dummy
Come with mummy.

Her demeaning sarcasm returns as well, when she sings, "Rapunzel knows best. Rapunzel's so mature now. Such a clever grownup miss." She then concocts a scene in which it appears that Flynn not only leaves Rapunzel but also sells her out to ruffians, and in which Gothel saves her. Her removal of the flowers—decorative, rather than magical—from Rapunzel's hair not only serves as foreshadowing of the magic flower's loss of power, but also reflects Gothel's desire to remove any reminders of Rapunzel's brief experience in the world outside her tower, no matter how beautiful those moments may have been.

Curiously, however, Gothel also demonstrates tenderness toward Rapunzel, in ways that are not accounted for in traditional fairy tales, as Warner and others discuss them[7] . Diverging from the role of the traditional stepmother of fairy tales who "demands work and gives no love" to her daughter (Lundell 66), Mother Gothel displays both the physical and the verbal affection toward Rapunzel that any mother would demonstrate toward her child. The work that Rapunzel does in the tower seems to be as much by personal choice, to keep her busy on long days alone, as at the directive of Gothel: "7 a.m., the usual morning lineup / Start on the chores and sweep till the floor's all clean / Polish and wax, do laundry, and mop and shine up / Sweep again, and by then it's like 7:15." Indeed, the narrator tells us that "Gothel raised the child as her own," although her frequent use of pet names like "sweetheart" and "darling" seems cavalier rather than caring,

and her endearment of "my flower" seems only to reinforce what Gothel really values in Rapunzel—the magic of the flower that resides in her hair. Nevertheless, Gothel willingly acquiesces to a difficult three-day journey to attain the pigments to make the special paints that Rapunzel requests for her eighteenth birthday, as a consolation prize for Gothel's refusal to take Rapunzel to see the floating lights that mark the day. And before departing, Gothel asks her, quite seriously, "You sure you'll be all right on your own?" She then tells her, "I love you very much, dear." When Rapunzel responds, "I love you more," Gothel's answer is, "I love you most." This piece of dialogue, appearing twice in the film, comes across as sincere, delivered without a whiff of irony or sarcasm on the part of Mother Gothel. Such affection on the part of this allegedly false mother does not appear in the traditional fairy tales.[8]

And Rapunzel seems to truly love her mother. She constantly tries to please her, and she feels incredibly guilty about leaving the tower to embark on the adoptee's requisite search for her origins in contemporary adoption tropes. Flynn's assessment of her situation as, "Overprotective mother, forbidden road trip. . .part of growing up. A little rebellion, a little adventure—that's good, healthy even," normalizes the relationship between mother and daughter, situating it in a way that makes it seem natural, everyday, real, and necessary. Torborg Lundell writes that the evil stepmother character in fairy tales "provides for detachment from mother power to facilitate female development toward independence and adulthood," but such detachment seems critical to all mother–daughter relationships, even positive ones (113). Rapunzel herself admits that her isolation in the tower is at least partly self-inflicted, to protect herself and her hair: "Mother says when I was a baby, people tried to cut it. They wanted to take it for themselves . . . A gift like that—it has to be protected. That's why mother never let me—that's why I never left." Rapunzel takes responsibility for her own captivity here, in the very moment when she begins to take responsibility for her own life, by striking out on her own. And here the film offers us a vision—albeit just a glimpse—of a positive adoptive relationship, one that could not have been predicted by the critics of traditional fairy tales.

We the audience, however, are supposed to recognize that Gothel wants to keep Rapunzel's gift for herself. The filmmakers shift Rapunzel and Gothel away from any sort of potential loving mother–daughter dynamic when Rapunzel recognizes her true birthright—and tries to leave her adoptive mother to seek out her biological parents. She confronts Gothel with her realization, demanding, "Did I mumble, Mother? Should I even call you that?" When Rapunzel begins to question Gothel's motherhood, Gothel, rather than defend the mothering she has provided to the girl for eighteen years, immediately abandons the pretense. "You want me to be the bad guy?" she repeats. "Fine. Now I'm the bad guy." And she instantly embodies the traditional Disney female villain, shifting quickly from mother to captor/jailor, from mater to Shuli Barzilai's "monster-mother" (526). Although Gothel clearly feels betrayed by Rapunzel— "Everything I did was to protect you," Gothel tells her—the film makes it impossible to sympathize with her, as she proceeds to bind Rapunzel with chains and gag her, then uses that big knife to stab Flynn as he tries to rescue the princess in traditional Disney fashion. Abdicating any responsibility for her actions, she spits out, "Now look what you've done Rapunzel." The game is up; no matter how much the film has demonstrated that Gothel loves Rapunzel, *Tangled* cannot reconcile the possibility of two mothers. The film, like much traditional literature that creates social polarities, thus "splits women between the

exalted and degraded" (Novy, *Reading* 30). Its earlier attempts to work against some of the stereotypes of adoptive parenthood, by allowing Gothel to be loving and affectionate, even protective, suggest that, yes, when there is no biological mother, adoption may be a good alternative. But once the biological mother is known to exist, the film requires the adoptive mother not just to step aside but also to degenerate, so that the true family can be reunited without the possibility of future interference from the Other(ed) mother.

Indeed, at the moment when Rapunzel recognizes that Gothel is not her biological mother, Gothel deteriorates in both appearance and function. In the tumult of the climax scene, Gothel's big mirror breaks. As mirrors are often associated with vanity, and as vanity is frequently allegorized in art and literature as an old woman (Warner 46) we see Gothel directly punished for her desire for beauty and youth. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar further suggest that mirrors in fairy tales such as Snow White represent both the elimination of a woman's prospects and "the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen's—and every woman's—self-evaluation" (38). Unlike the Queen's mirror in Snow White, Gothel's mirror is not magic; but like the Queen's, it ultimately reflects back exactly that which she least wishes to see—that she is not the fairest of them all. Gothel's options have certainly disappeared at this point, and the rules of fairy tales, often steeped in sexism, prevent this aged woman from continuing with her charade of beauty, youth, and goodness.

Thus the only way for the film to resolve this thorny relationship is to kill the false mother/crone. Warner writes, "Since classical times, the hag has been reviled; and the hag who does not know herself to be a hag but primps and coquettes like a young woman came in for special abuse" (47). As Rapunzel's hair turns brown when Flynn, in the climax of the film, cuts it off, Gothel's simultaneously turns white. Her hand wrinkles and ages, and her face becomes skeletal. The cultural horrors of female aging come into full play here: Gothel pulls the cowl of her cloak over her head as she wails and moans, hiding her shameful appearance, unable to look at what she has become: an old woman. As she embodies the third part of the maiden/mother/crone triad, she evacuates her position as mother to the maiden Rapunzel, leaving the maternal role empty, ready to be filled by another. Yet this is not the wise and kindly crone of the Mother Goose variety, but rather the maligned and evil hag of more traditional fairy tales. She is thus punished in the manner of all such evil women, by becoming ugly. Marcia Lieberman tells us that, in fairy tales, "those women who are human, and who have power and seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive" (197). But the film punishes this monstrous woman even further. Trying to see herself in her broken mirror, Gothel is denied even age and gender: in the multiplied and refracted reflections, she is all eyes and white hair —no longer appearing human but rather a literal monster, framed in horror and villainy. Nothing motherly remains of her, adoptive or otherwise. Like the evil queen who transforms into a dragon in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, Gothel, portrayed as inhuman, can now be killed without remorse. When she is tripped out the window—not by Rapunzel or Flynn, because our heroes can't have her blood on their hands, but by Pascale, Rapunzel's chameleon friend—Gothel is nothing but dust when she hits the ground, further evidence that she was not really living, not truly human. Thus the film's creators dispose of the problem of having two mothers: one must not be real, must not be human, must not be loving. So, in this drearily familiar formula, she must die.

Unlike many contemporary novels about adoption in which, Margaret Homans argues, authentic origin stories are constructed and fictionalized rather than found and stabilized ("Adoption Narratives" 14), *Tangled* provides a clear and simple, albeit romanticized, origin story for its protagonist. In a distinct deviation from the Brothers Grimm's version of the fairy tale, the film's Rapunzel finally finds her lost biological mother, whom, not surprisingly, she resembles: Rapunzel has the same eyes, same hair, same features as her birthmother—all clearly Caucasian, made even more obvious by the fact that her birthmother, through, we assume, the power of the flower she has eaten, has not aged. This, then, is her true mother: young, white, beautiful—all the characteristics that fairy tales require of good women. Conveniently, Rapunzel's biological mother is also a queen; as Warner points out, "Fairy tales play to the child's hankering after nobler, richer, altogether better origins, the fantasy of being a prince or a princess in disguise" (210). The same can be said of the stereotyped adopted child in our cultural imaginary, dreaming of birth parents who are wealthier, smarter, and maybe more lenient than their own parents. When Rapunzel first sees her birthmother, she hesitates only briefly, as if fearing rejection. But as her birthmother does not vacillate, the two women embrace in a tearful, joyful moment that we are instructed to read as finality, as homecoming. This ending embraces the "happy discovery" trope of adoption narratives that Novy describes as a "myth" that shapes "feelings, thoughts, language, and even laws about adoption" ("Imagining" 1). Similarly, Nelson writes,

> This downplaying of what has seemed to be genuine love for Gothel on Rapunzel's part is consistent with attitudes toward adoptive families displayed in contemporary reality TV shows such as *Find My Family*, which present reunion with the birth family as magically satisfying and render the adoptive family invisible. That the royal couple and Mother Gothel share a central trait, the sense of abiding loss expressed in Gothel's incantatory song in the lines "Save what once was lost, / Bring back what once was mine," is apparently irrelevant; Gothel can have nothing in common with "real" mothers. (8)

The birthfather is tangential to this scene, as he awkwardly hugs both women. The reunion between birthmother and daughter is the central moment, the recognition of kinship, the establishment of the familial bond, and the reaffirmation of the significance of biology and blood. Our narrator Flynn tells us, "Rapunzel was home. And she finally had a real family."

That word, "real," is ubiquitously used to describe the biological family. Of my own daughter, whom I adopted from Russia, I regularly have people asking me, "Where's her real mom?" "Did you meet her real mother?" (I recall one response posted on a listserv by a frustrated adoptive mother, who said, "This is as real as it gets!") Gothel, however, has no such opportunities for speaking out, talking back, reclaiming Rapunzel as her daughter. And indeed, why should she? According to the film, she was never the legitimate parent, never the nurturing mother of our cultural stereotypes, never the queen who could render her daughter, through bloodlines, a princess. Cynthia Callahan points out that adoption has functioned symbolically and consistently in literature to address "issues of authenticity and belonging that resonate far beyond an individual family" (3). Such resonances reflect larger cultural stereotypes that dictate women's roles both within and outside our nuclear familial structures. And Benson tells us that the contemporary fairy tale speaks to "the extraordinary scope of the narrative imagination and of the ways in which

fantastical imaginings can tell of real-world difficulties and a hope of resolution" (4). The hope in *Tangled* manifests itself solely and precisely in the authenticity of the biological family, the maintenance of which is promoted by a patriarchal society, which remains invested in preserving the status quo. As Heidi Hartmann attests, "*Patriarchy is not simply hierarchical organization*, but hierarchy in which *particular* people fill *particular* places" (103). The single, adoptive mother Gothel does not serve patriarchy and therefore cannot —must not—re/dis/place the biological mother. For its intended audience of children, the film encodes and reaffirms the role of the adoptive mother as false and vilified, causing such ideology to seep into our cultural unconscious, planting in the very young beliefs about family and motherhood that will be difficult to uproot. As Elizabeth Marshall points out, "Fairy tales, then, serve as informal child-rearing material. Given their ubiquity, these tales function as salient educational tools because of their gender-laden content and because of their form" (408). She also argues, however, that "texts intended for children often reflect adult struggles and anxieties" (407). Thus the film establishes and perpetuates misogynistic ideas regarding the villainy and falsity of the adoptive mother. And yet, as I hope I have shown, Gothel *is* mother to Rapunzel, for many years, in many ways. But following the biological imperative of pop culture, the film erases the adoptive mother, eliminates her, until nothing remains but ashes on the ground. Bordo argues, "It's sometimes hard to figure out, however, whether a story is providing an occasion for mastering fears or merely creating new ones" (320). The film *Tangled* not only plays into our cultural beliefs about the inadequacy and, in some cases, the malignancy of the adoptive mother, but it also creates new fears about the role of adoption in children's lives.

Notes

1. In some cases, mothers remain missing throughout these stories, as is the case in *Finding Nemo* and *Aladdin*. The message here seems to be that the male protagonists in these films do not require a mother figure to attain success. Mothers appear briefly in *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White,* but they play a minor role in these films.
2. See, for example, Griffin, Kiyomi, and Ayres.
3. Many parents on these lists also expressed incredible relief that their children did NOT associate them with Mother Gothel; one mother writes of her daughter, "Katie, unlike much of the world, does not equate birth mother with real mother" (qtd. in Nelson 6).
4. In the film's defense, *Tangled* does temper Disney's traditional and sexist depictions of its heroine. Rapunzel, unlike most of the Disney princesses, is physically strong. She also initially and easily resists the charms of her thief/prince, though only temporarily.
5. The Grimms' version derives from the 1697 story of Persinette by Charlotte-Rose de la Force, who is "held captive in a tower by an old witch to whom she has been handed over" by her mother in exchange for food from the witch's garden (Warner 222). Nelson points out that Gothel's abduction of the baby in the Disney film provides a significant deviation from the Grimms' version (Nelson 7). Other deviations include the transformation of the prince into a thief and the reunion of Rapunzel with her birth parents.
6. An interesting point of comparison is Emma Donoghue's novel *Room*, in which a child remains in confinement for the formative years of life, protected from danger by his mother. *Room* tells the story of Jack, a five-year-old boy who lives his entire life in the shed behind the house of the man who has kidnapped his mother; Jack's mother gives birth to him and raises him alone, with their only other human contact the nightly visits from her regular rapist. *Tangled* is a much happier captivity narrative: there is no male figure, and Rapunzel sings and dances, paints and cleans, provided with every creature comfort her mother can provide to her. But while Ma in *Room*, unlike Gothel, is trying to get Jack *out* of their imprisonment, like Gothel she is overly protective of her child, painting a much different picture of the outside world (in Jack's

case, that the world he sees on television is a fiction) in order to keep Jack content. And while both texts begin in captivity, each is equally interested in what happens when the captive escapes.

7. The musical *Into the Woods* suggests that the witch/mother loves Rapunzel, albeit in regressive ways: hers is a rather tough love, as she follows the traditional fairy tale of exiling the girl into the wilderness with her two newborn twins.
8. Bruno Bettelheim claims that it is a selfish love that causes the sorceress in the Grimms' version of the Rapunzel tale to keep the girl locked away (149), but such love hardly represents a positive relationship.

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